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THE EXAMPLE OF A GREAT LIFE.

BY THE EDITOR.

ONE bitterly cold day in March, 1881, Mr. Peter Cooper stopped by appointment to take me to see certain improvements he was making in the Cooper Union building. When we arrived at our destination, we found the elevator boy absent from his post, and, at Mr. Cooper's suggestion that he might have gone to dinner, I started in quest of the delinquent. On my return from a fruitless search Mr. Cooper was visibly annoyed. The building was high ; we were bound for the topmost story, and there remained no other means of ascent than by the stairway. At last he looked at me dubiously. "Don't you think you can manage it ?" he asked.

"The question is not about myself, Mr. Cooper, but about you," I answered (he being over ninety and I less than a third of that age). "Oh !" he exclaimed, as if much relieved ; "I, on the contrary, was thinking of you ; I am all right." And he proceeded to mount the steps with ease, if not with agility.

The incident was typical of the man, illustrating a kindliness, a forgetfulness of self, that in this case was almost capable of bringing a smile to the lips of unreflecting people ; but it was this forgetfulness of self, this abnegation of the privileges of old age on his own part, this ever-present sympathy with the young, that, on his decease, two years afterwards, drew the multitudes of New York with uncovered heads along the very road we had come, that draped in sadness our cities, and that tolled the bells in mourning spires as Peter Cooper's mortal remains were borne to the grave.

It was these qualities that also gathered together the great mass of people on the evening of the 12th inst.* to honor the one-hundredth anniversary of his birth.

* February 12, 1891.

Peter Cooper's life stretches over a period fraught with greater changes than any the world has ever seen, or will probably ever see again compressed within the same number of years. His life is a span between the Machine Age and the remnants of the Feudal Age that lingered even in the New World.

In every sense he was the epitome of his time, of its hopefulness, of its inventiveness, of its dawning charity, and of its greater love of men.

Mr. Cooper, in short, was in perfect harmony with his age, and this is the only way to explain the success with which he exercised his varied gifts and his diversified talents. The excuse for my little sketch of him at this time is not only the fact of its being now the one-hundredth anniversary of his birth, but that his career has special significance in connection with the discussion on the obligations of wealth to which *THE REVIEW* is opening its pages.

I shall quote from a considerable number of his letters and papers, and I shall repeat bits of conversation which, owing to my near relationship, it was my good fortune to enjoy with him, apologizing for the repetition of any circumstances that may be already known to the reader.

On the subject of ancestry, which I suppose is the natural preface to my remarks, Mr. Cooper held positive views. "I have always considered the conduct of one's ancestors to be as important as the tendencies one inherits through them," he said. "For their acts may serve as examples to be followed or as warnings of what must be avoided. The acts of my ancestors, at all events, served as both. They set me a glowing example of patriotism and devotion to humanity, and they supplied me a warning against business carelessness and getting into debt."

The statement was strictly accurate. His grandfather, John Campbell, served gallantly in the Revolution, and further, as Deputy Quartermaster-General, advanced eleven hundred guineas in gold to the cause. He neglected, however, to take security for the loan, which was never repaid till 1833, when by special act of Congress restitution was made to his heirs, though that was long after the money could have helped his grandson in his struggles with the world. John Campbell lost his life from the effects of yellow-fever, having refused to leave his post as alderman in New York during the scourge of 1795.

"I received from my father," continued Mr. Cooper, "the same example and warning. He fought for his country as a patriot, but forgot that hospitality could only be supported by an ample fortune. For he built a store and a church at Peekskill, only to find that the visiting clergy ate up the profits of the store, while the church, being consigned to religion, naturally failed to make up the deficit, or" (with a smile I well remember) "stored the payments too high in the next world to be of any use in this."

"Mr. Cooper, is there such a thing as luck?" I once asked him.

"There is. The greatest piece of luck I ever had was investing the first surplus money I earned in a lottery ticket."

"And you won?"

"No, I lost; but I gained this experience: that the wheel of fortune is only turned by common-sense applied to common events."

With these principles to start with, it was natural that Mr. Cooper should advance rapidly. Beginning his career with a carriage-builder, he invented, before his apprenticeship had expired, an improved process for mortising the hubs of wheels, which as late as 1879 was still the method by which every wheel in this country was mortised. Indeed, inventions played a large part in his early life.

Mr. Robert Fulton came to see one of these, and he certainly extended little encouragement to the youthful genius at a time it was sorely needed. It was a model for driving a ferry-boat by compressed air, and, according to Mr. Cooper, the distinguished visitor looked at it superciliously and then turned away without a word. "I was only an apprentice boy at that time, and he could see no good in it; but I have carried the wreck of that model about with me all my life."

He sold his next patent—a machine for shearing the nap from cloth—to Mr. Vassar. What a singular coincidence, this early meeting between the founders of Vassar College and the Cooper Institute! Mr. Cooper had reserved certain rights in his machine for himself, and during the War of 1812 these paid handsomely. It may surprise some to learn that Mr. Cooper, in addition to his other avocations, served for a short time as a soldier, though it could hardly have been during his military career that

the following incident occurred: "Late one afternoon I left a farm-house, where I had gone to visit some friends, and started on foot to return to a small village where I was stopping. I knew that I was in the neighborhood of the enemy, but I had no idea I was so close to their lines until I heard across a wooded valley, along which the road ran, the sound of shots. Then I saw the smoke, as of a skirmish, rising over the trees, and a moment afterwards I heard quite distinctly the cheers for King George intermingled with those of our men."

The war was followed by a long and serious commercial depression. An invention about this time—probably the indirect result of his marriage—was certainly in harmony with the now pacific condition of the country, and the immediate sale it met with proved the adaptability of the inventor's genius. It was a self-rocking cradle for a baby, with a swinging arrangement over it to keep off the flies, and the further combination of a musical box to lull the infant to sleep. A Yankee pedler to whom he happened to show it was so overcome by admiration that in the height of his enthusiasm he offered him his wagon, his horse, and everything the vehicle contained, promising to forward a hurdy-gurdy as a last instalment when he reached home.

"On that we concluded the bargain," said Mr. Cooper, "as the hurdy-gurdy was a fair offset to the musical box. I had heard one play before on board a ship, and I thought it the sweetest music I had ever heard. It so attracted the passengers that the boy player received from them quite a contribution."

This simplicity of character was one of Mr. Cooper's most pronounced traits. It is the simplicity of the child, and it has been said that no real genius can be without it.

His next invention was of a more ambitious character. Before the completion of the Erie Canal he conceived the idea that the water which supplied the locks and the other elevated waters along the canal could be utilized to move the canal-boats by means of an endless chain driven by a water-wheel. To test the theory, he drove a mile of posts, two hundred feet apart, along the bank of the East River. To these a double tier of rollers was attached to carry an endless wire chain, which in this case was driven by a tide-wheel. Governor Clinton and Colonel Nicholas Fish, with his son, the then youthful Hamilton, who was to develop into a distinguished Secretary of State, attended

the first trial. A small boat was hitched to the chain, the guests were invited on board, the water-wheel was started, and the round trip of two miles was made in eleven minutes.

Governor Clinton paid \$800 for the option to purchase the privilege for the canal. It was not used, however. The reasons were curious. It seems that Governor Clinton, in securing the right of way for the canal, had held out to the farmers, whose lands lay adjacent to its course, the prospect of large sales of produce for the mules that would be required for towing the boats. The endless chain worked without oats. Thus, as Mr. Seth Low observed in his address the other evening at the centennial anniversary of Mr. Cooper's birth, the endless chain was discarded because mules voted. Fifty years afterward the president of the Delaware and Raritan Canal Company hit upon the same scheme for getting his boats through the locks. He tried it—it worked well—he rushed to Washington to secure a patent, only to find that Peter Cooper had anticipated him by fifty years.

This invention marked a turning-point in Mr. Cooper's career. His first advancement in material prosperity dates from about this time. He went into the grocery business, then into the manufacture of glue, and improved processes gave him the market.

Indeed, Mr. Cooper's life well exemplifies the versatility and the progressive, indefatigable spirit of American youth. He never took a new step until it promised to lead him further on the road to success. Stealing precious moments from his hours of toil for inventions; devoting his evenings to study and improvement; economizing in all things with a horror of debt and a love of conscientious work, he carried with him always a recollection of his own early disadvantages, and struggled for wealth in order that his wealth might make success easier for other men. "My only recollection," he often said, "of being at school was at Peekskill, where I attended three or four quarters, part of the time, probably one-half of it, being half-day school."

He was now in a position to interest himself in the great questions of the day. The uprising of the Greeks touched a sympathetic chord in the hearts of Americans, and in speaking of that event he said: "The excitement was very great, and I partook of the common fervor. I met Mr. Clay, who was advocating the cause in Congress, at the Astor House, and heard him speak. He was a very inspiring man. For a person who

had so heartfelt a horror and detestation of war, I became very much excited at the time."

Besides subscribing to the fitting-out of a ship for the relief of the Greeks, Mr. Cooper proceeded to build and equip a torpedo-boat as a further contribution to the enterprise. Unfortunately, before the result of an accident connected with one of its trials could be repaired, the ship sailed, and the torpedo-boat was consigned to the glue factory, which subsequently caught fire, and was destroyed along with its incongruous occupant.

Mr. Cooper's inventiveness partook of the nature of prophetic insight. Steam locomotion on water was to extend to locomotion by steam on land and was to revolutionize society, and although locomotives had been introduced in England, and, I believe, one or two small models had been exhibited here,* his was the first built here that was put to practical use in the United States. It was partially made by his own hand, and was intended for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, which had been originally planned for a horse railroad.

The particular fact that Mr. Cooper wished to demonstrate was that a locomotive could pass around curves of a very small radius, which were a special feature of this road. His experiment was eminently satisfactory. The patent for his machinery was dated April 28, 1828. It was signed by the President, John Quincy Adams, and Henry Clay, Secretary of State. On account of its diminutive size, the engine was christened the Tom Thumb. An amusing incident took place on one of its trial trips and is worthy of repetition, if for no other reason than as an illustration of a condition of affairs long since past. For it seems that the owners of stage coaches in the vicinity of Baltimore looked with anything but approval on Mr. Cooper's efforts and rightly predicted that their business would suffer if his teapot, as they called it, succeeded. Therefore they resolved to set the matter at rest once and forever, and to demonstrate in a convincing manner the inferiority of steam to horse power. Selecting one of their finest and fleetest steeds, they had him hitched to a light conveyance and waited for the engine at a favorable point of the road

* See W. H. Brown's "*History of the First Locomotives in America*," published by D. Appleton & Co., 1874.

that skirted the track. Then when the little "teapot," with Mr. Cooper directing it (for he was usually his own engineer), approached, the race began. The engine hissed, the horse puffed, and the crowd yelled, according to a paper of the day. First the horse gained, then the engine; then the horse forged ahead, and again the engine. Finally the horse fell further and further behind, when the Tom Thumb, indulging in a premature whistle of exultation, strained its mechanism in a way to cause a considerable escape of steam.

"Though I tried to prevent the escape with my own hand," explains Mr. Cooper, "the horse began to creep up on me. Finally, I had to stop to repair the accident; and though I nearly caught up again, I did not do so quite. I felt a little chagrined, but I thought in time the engine would be avenged." The accuracy of this prophecy can hardly be disputed. The Tom Thumb, having fulfilled its mission, was replaced by other and more improved machines, and was put away until its resurrection nearly half a century afterwards, when along with its parent it was an honored guest at the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the city of Baltimore.

Mr. Cooper was an enterprising man of business, too. "The progress of the world is forged in iron," he said, and to meet the demands for iron which he foresaw railroads were destined to create, he entered into the iron business with fervor, building a rolling-mill in New York, opening mines at Ringwood, and starting into life the large iron industries of Trenton, Philipsburg, and Durham. With steam to convey the bodies of men, must not electricity convey their thoughts? And steam locomotion an acknowledged fact, he set to work to unite Europe and America with an electric cable. With the coöperation of Mr. Cyrus Field, Mr. Moses Taylor, Mr. Wilson G. Hunt, and Mr. Marshall O. Roberts, the New York, Newfoundland, and London Telegraph Company was founded, of which Mr. Cooper was made president. The first meeting was held at the Clarendon Hotel, and as a result Mr. Field and a Mr. White were sent to Newfoundland to obtain the proper charters. The difficulties that confronted the company from its first inception have been too frequently told to bear repetition now. Suffice it to say that, after frequent failures and the disbursement of large sums of money, a cable starting from Ireland and one from this side were united in mid-ocean.

This transmitted some four or five hundred messages, but the current grew fainter and fainter, and finally stopped completely.

Many people held that it was only a pretence that messages had been sent. It happened, however, that the British government was about to transport a considerable force of men from Canada to China in the war with the Chinese, and that one of the cablegrams that had been received stated that peace had been declared. The sailing of the troop ships was therefore delayed. When the news was confirmed by letter, the doubts of the public were removed on the score of the reliability of the messages. But the cable was broken, and as a commercial venture the enterprise seemed doomed to failure. Two years elapsed and again Mr. Field was sent out to England. He was laughed at; no sensible man would listen to his proposals. He succeeded, however, in "electrifying" an old Quaker gentleman into subscribing four hundred thousand dollars. In fourteen days afterwards the balance of the funds was raised and in due time a new cable laid down. "Then we went to work," says Mr. Cooper, "to find the first one, which we finally succeeded in doing, and, joining the broken ends together, we had two complete cables across the ocean."

"I was often thousands of dollars out of pocket trying to keep this thing going," said Mr. Cooper, "but after the cable became a success the stock rose up to \$90 per share." Indeed, Mr. Cooper's wealth was largely augmented through his connection with the Atlantic cable. Thus fortune only frowned on him to make her smile the sweeter.

And now the war draws on. Mr. Cooper had always recommended that the government should endeavor to prevent the crisis that was approaching by the purchase of the slaves, and when South Carolina seceded he hurried to Washington with a delegation of distinguished citizens to learn the views of the President on the situation. It seems Mr. Buchanan kept the deputations waiting, and, when he finally presented himself, sat down without saying a word. After a pause, Mr. A. A. Low, one of the party, informed him of the object of the mission in a very eloquent and able manner, to which the President replied that he had no power in the matter.*

* I am not able to verify the exact phase of the matter to which Mr. Cooper refers, but I believe it related to the garrisoning of certain forts in the South.

Though advocating peace, the moment Sumter was fired upon Mr. Cooper threw himself with characteristic fervor into the war movement. In the mass-meeting a few days after the capture of that fortress he thus addressed his fellow-citizens :

“Shall it [slavery] succeed ? You say not, and I unite with you in your decision. We cannot allow it to succeed. We should spend our lives, our property, and leave the land itself a desert before such an institution should triumph over the free people of this country. I know, my friends, that will be the feeling when the people wake up to the importance of this crisis. Let us, therefore, unite to sustain the government by every means in our power, to arm and equip in the shortest possible time an army of the best men that can be found in the country.”

Mr. Cooper's claims to fame are numerous. As first chairman of the Citizens' Association, he worked valiantly in behalf of municipal reform. He served on the Board of Aldermen, as his grandfather had done before him, when the position was one which it was the ambition of honorable men to secure. He was at the head of the Board of Education, and permitted the use of his name as a candidate for the Presidency, to give the most striking proof of his fidelity to the views on the currency which he had so long advocated.

The great work of his life, however, and one that throws the rest into shadow, I have reserved for the last. He builds the Cooper Institute. Other charities have cost more money, others have been conducted on a more lavish scale, but it is doubtful whether any other has so successfully accomplished the noble purpose which its founder had in view, namely, to help youth to help themselves.

Nor did he wait until he was affluent to make a beginning. He purchased the ground for its site lot by lot, and laid by dollar by dollar for its construction.

The way he came to hit upon the idea can best be told in his own words. “While serving as assistant alderman, I became acquainted with a gentleman who, having just returned from France, informed me that while in Paris he visited the Polytechnic School and the schools of arts and trades, founded by the first Napoleon. What interested me most in his description was the manner of teaching and the wonderful appliances for illustrating the various branches of instruction. I was deeply impressed when

he told me that there were hundreds of poor young men who lived on a crust of bread from day to day in order to get the benefit of the course of lectures which they could attend without charge.

“I recalled the time when there was no night-school in New York or any means by which a poor boy could acquire knowledge except in the ordinary schools, which required both time and money. I then formed a resolute determination that, if I could ever get the means, I would build an institution and throw its doors open at night as well as in the day, that the young people of this city might enjoy the advantages of knowledge, which would enable them to improve their condition and fit them for all the varied and useful purposes of life. To give them this was the motive power of all my earnest efforts in carrying on and extending my business. It also inspired my wife as well as myself with the necessity of the greatest economy; for, from the time I formed the plan of setting up such a school of learning to the completion of the Union, she gave it her warmest sympathy and aid, of which I shall never fail to speak with the sincerest gratitude.”

The president of Columbia College, the other evening, in his address on Mr. Cooper, made—if I correctly understood him—a very good point when he said that the philanthropist must have appreciated the increasing wearisomeness of labor through its manifold divisions, and that he hoped to counteract this by giving the working classes a knowledge of art, and through it a means of making life beautiful. In his scheme the beautiful and the useful certainly went hand in hand; and if ever—which God forbid!—that building should be razed to the ground, within the cornerstone will be found a parchment containing these words:

“The great object that I desire to accomplish by the erection of this institution is to open the avenues of scientific knowledge to the youth of our city and country, and so unfold the volume of nature that the young may see the beauties of creation, enjoy its blessing, and learn to love the author from whom cometh every good and perfect gift.”

Mr. Cooper was so identified with the earlier traditions of New York that I can hardly avoid a brief mention of his recollections.

They are indeed extremely interesting. He had seen with his own eyes the remnants of the *chevaux de frise* erected on Duane

Street to keep off the Indians, as well as the old wooden fortification on the Battery, around which the *élite* of the city resided. "I well remember standing near St. Paul's Church and seeing Washington's funeral pass by," he has often said. "The peculiar way in which his boots were reversed in the stirrups of the charger that followed the hearse made a great impression on me." "Where the Register's Office is now was the old jail. It was in those times literally filled with debtors." "The country can never appreciate," continued Mr. Cooper in this connection, "what it owes to Silas M. Stillman when he got a law passed which abolished imprisonment for debt. Thus we set the world an example which Europe was quick to follow."

Speaking about debtors, Mr. Cooper once told me of a man who, after making a bad failure, settled up his affairs by taking the benefit of the new bankrupt act. Moving into the country, this gentleman found consolation for his past misfortunes in going from house to house in his neighborhood, warning the inhabitants to flee from the wrath to come, asking whether each and every one of his neighbors had made their peace with God, and whether they were prepared to die, taking great pains generally to inquire into the spiritual and moral condition of everybody. On the bankrupt's approaching a holy, but slightly cynical, patriarch of the neighborhood, and inquiring with much concern as to his spiritual condition, he was met with the reply: "I believe that my Heavenly Father will keep strict account of my good deeds and of my bad deeds, and if it should happen that my bad deeds should outnumber my good deeds, I suppose I will have to take the benefit of the act."

While on the subject of crime and its punishment, I remember Mr. Cooper leaving his son's house one day, and, on my following him down the steps to assist him to his carriage, he proposed that I should walk with him into Washington Square, directly opposite. Pointing with his stick to the flower-lined fountain, he spoke of the changed spirit that had come over society, going on to state that very near, if not on, the exact place where that fountain stood he remembered seeing a man hung for theft.

"The recollection has chased me through life like a nightmare," he exclaimed, "and whenever I look up I see him hanging, his head bent over on one side. There he remained for several hours, with the jeering crowd about him. Right over

there," and he retraced his steps to the northeast corner of Fifth Avenue and the park, "once occurred a scene that aroused in the unfeeling people that witnessed it even greater merriment. Two negroes were sentenced to be flogged, and the man in charge of them, thinking to save himself the trouble of inflicting the double punishment, hit upon the ingenious device of making each one flog the other. At first, as may be supposed, the punishment was light; the culprits mutually agreed to spare each other as much as possible. At last, however, one hit a little harder than he intended; the other retaliated, and each, becoming angry, laid on his blows in a manner that made the punishment greater than the severest taskmaster could well have inflicted. Young as I was, I tried to stop the proceedings, but without success.

"Though Washington Square was at that time the Potter's Field of New York, punishments also occasionally took place here, as things were loosely managed in those days."

Mr. Cooper was always genial, talking about New York and its people, its old residences and its customs, now departed, in a way most interesting to hear.

"Do you know," he once asked me, "the origin of the word Manhattan? When the first vessel arrived here, the Indians on the island were invited to a collation prepared for them on ship-board; and, it would seem, they imbibed too freely. Afterwards they alluded to their feast as a Manhattan, meaning, I suppose"—and here the old gentleman laughed heartily—"what is called now an awful spree. I am not certain of the genuineness of the story," he went on, "as this was one of the few scenes too far back in the past for me to have witnessed."

Again: "My grandfather once had a neighbor who made a special study of astrology, and who, on being asked the cause of a sudden depression of spirits, replied that he had just discovered that his three sons had been born under planets signifying for the three the following melancholy fates:

"That one was destined to become a mendicant, the next a thief, and the third a murderer.

"My ancestor pondered deeply over these gloomy prognostics. At last he thus spoke: 'I think I can give you a suggestion that will enable your sons to lead respectable lives in spite of the augury. The one that is to become poor, make a minister of him, for pov-

erty is the heritage of the church. The one that's to become a robber, make a lawyer of him, and his talents may still be turned to profit. While as for the one that's to become a homicide, I fear I will have to advise your making a doctor of him, for that is the only profession where his propensities will never be questioned.' "

His gift in repeating these little stories, I think, was unique, and it lasted down to the close of his life. In one so aged it was invested with a certain indescribable pathos, displaying as it did a supreme simplicity and unselfishness that at the gateway of eternity could think of giving others pleasure.

At a dinner in his honor on the ninety-first anniversary of his birth his spirits were as genial as ever. At the close he thus replied to the congratulations of his friends :

" In looking back, I can see that my career has been divided into three eras :

" During the first thirty years I was engaged in getting a start in life.

" During the second I was occupied in getting means for carrying out the modest plans which I had long formed for the benefit of man.

" During the last thirty years I have devoted myself to the execution of these plans. This work is now done."

To summarize the success of this work it has always seemed to me that it was less the establishment of a great charity than the development of a new system of philanthropy—a philanthropy that raised instead of abased the recipient in his own estimation. This, combined with his qualities as a man, will cause Peter Cooper, with advancing time, instead of diminishing, to increase in distinctness, and will keep his white, silky locks, his flowing beard, and his patriarchal figure always fresh in the memory of coming generations.

LLOYD BRYCE.